



**Kathryn Ott Lovell**  
Chief Executive Officer & President  
Visitor Center Corp.

## **PHILADELPHIA VISITOR CENTER**

### **Executive Summary/Synopsis**

All across America, there are thousands of parks and recreational centers in cities and towns for the use of ordinary citizens. Imagine all the parks, public libraries, playgrounds, basketball courts, tennis courts, etc. that are in one city, all run by the department of parks and recreation. There are many officials in cities and towns that run their respective departments of parks and recreation. Many of these departments are underfunded because local officials do not see their value. For Philadelphia, a case can be made that this is true.

COVID-19 took the United States by storm in 2020. Schools were shut down, businesses were shut down, *everyone* was shut down. For the city of Philadelphia, that particular summer was a hot one. While many were able to escape the city to go somewhere cooler, there were thousands of families all around Philadelphia who could not escape the heat. To make it worse, there were kids in the city who were not able to play with other kids. Basketball hoops were taken down to discourage their playing. Moreover, for many of these kids, their parents were working constantly and could not entertain them. Philadelphia saw a problem, but it did not have a solution. However, the Commissioner of the Parks and Recreation Department saw an opportunity to not only help the children of Philadelphia, but also prove the importance of her department.

### **Background**

Kathryn Ott Lovell considers herself a lifelong public servant. Currently the CEO and President of the Philadelphia Visitor Center, Kathryn considers it the best job she could have; in a sense, she holds the key to the city, and is the highest-ranking "host with the most." A natural people-person, Kathryn is proud to welcome locals and tourists alike to her hometown, eager to share the city's history, and in effect, America's, too. "Democracy started here." Before earning her current role, Kathryn took many steps towards it in the public eye.



Early in her career, she worked at her high school alma mater, building out a new city-wide open enrollment program. Through this position, she learned about fundraising and realized the need for welcoming people to a cause. This led to her next job at Mural Arts Philadelphia, a non-profit which supports local artists who literally paint their passion across the city. After growing the organization to a globally-known entity, the then-mayor asked her to take on the Commissioner role at the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation department.

Kathryn loves to promote the city of Philadelphia. She was born and raised in Mayfair, attending St. Hubert's Catholic High School For Girls before college, and still resides within the city. She wishes to bring hospitality to people by welcoming them into the City of Brotherly Love, showing them all the wonderful things it has to offer. These aspirations are what brought her to accept the position of Commissioner of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation department.

This department is made up of about 1000 employees. They help connect visitors and residents to the beautiful grounds of Philadelphia, ensuring community enjoyment, safety and wellbeing. In the city of Philadelphia, 11% of its grounds are dedicated to Parks and Recreation Centers. There are over 150 parks and about 170 Recreation Centers. All these centers are the main places that many children go to hang out with their friends and family.

#### Case (Problem)

During the summer of 2020, Kathryn was serving as the Commissioner of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation department. She was one of the officials on ground zero in Philadelphia during COVID. So many questions and uncertainty filled the air as city employees were trying to figure out what to do. How would people be fed, clothed, and housed? What if matters were to get worse in the future? This was very early into the pandemic; a vaccine wasn't even near the horizon. At this point, the entire world was still learning as the experts learned, trying to stay safe and healthy. Only a few months past March of that year, masks were few and far between, everyone was cleaning everything, and life as society knew it was drastically changing, perhaps forever.

One of the biggest questions Kathryn faced concerned children. In general, cities tend to maintain hotter temperatures than suburban and rural areas. Even more so, poorer neighborhoods average a temperature increase of 20 to 30 degrees hotter than more affluent neighborhoods. Neighborhoods lacking in income tend to have less green space with much more blacktop square footage. Within these sections of the city, most of the children did not have anywhere to go with supervision. The majority of the parents in these areas held jobs that were dubbed "essential workers," so they had no choice but to go into work during the height of the pandemic crisis. Summer camps were closed by city regulation, which left thousands of young children home with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Kathryn also had an issue with her workers. 400 Recreation Center employees had been restricted from going into work. Per the new city regulations, all of these people were issued notice to stay home for the unforeseeable future. If Kathryn did not find work for them, she feared the city would push her to lay them off, worsening their livelihoods. What made this issue a little bit more difficult is that her staff was all union laborers, but divided among three separate unions. This means that for every worker, she would have to sort out their specific capabilities with the respective union leaders. Who can work where, when and how? Kathryn needed to keep her staff safe, but she also needed to show her department's worth to the mayor. The department was already severely underfunded, and she felt it was her obligation to prove that Parks and Recreation was a necessary part of Philadelphia.

As Emergency Operation Centers opened up around the city, Kathryn was able to temporarily send her staff back to work in new roles. Her employees went to work at the EOCs, which were set up to provide food, water and clothing to Philadelphians who needed these necessities. However, once this temporary solution ended, Kathryn's 400 employees were once again out of work. She continued to worry about the safety of the city kids and health of every person she was responsible for, employees and youth alike.

***How will Kathryn solve the problem of keeping kids active and safe while being socially distanced and cool, all the while finding work for her employees? Should Kathryn find an alternative work situation for her employees, even if it means risking infection?***

## Conclusion

Kathryn Ott Lovell looked to her vast experience in non-profit and city work to decide how to alleviate the stressors Covid-19 brought to Philadelphia. This means she immediately knew the solution would rely on teamwork, and needed to collaborate with multiple departments, colleagues and other cities across America.

Philadelphia set up Emergency Operation Centers (EOCs) where residents could find essentials – food, clothing and help with shelter. Kathryn was able to provide four hundred of her employees work while these temporary warehouses were in effect. Due to city regulations on social distancing, sanitizing rules and a mask mandate, Kathryn believed it was possible to keep her employees safe while giving them the opportunity to work. To combat the need for child supervision while summer camps were closed, Kathryn fell back on a 50-year-old Philadelphia program, Playstreets. As EOCs closed, employees worked on designated streets throughout the city to supervise children. Between crafts, games and sporting goods, children enjoyed a summer outdoors while staff exemplified the meaning that Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love.